



# Washington State Department of Agriculture News Release

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## **Be Alert! Holiday sales can come with scanner pricing errors**

**OLYMPIA** – Do you believe a scanner price must be right because scanners are high tech? During the hectic holiday shopping season most consumers spend a good deal of time shopping for the best prices, but savings may evaporate because of incorrect prices in a store's scanning system.

Washington State Department of Agriculture (WSDA) Weights and Measures inspectors teamed up with inspectors from the cities of Seattle and Spokane in late November to conduct scanner tests at retail stores across the state.

The inspectors checked 10,810 items at 126 stores, ranging from department stores, pharmacies and large and small specialty stores. They found that three out of every 100 items they selected rang up incorrectly—sometimes in favor of businesses, but more often in favor of shoppers.

Ten percent of the stores checked failed according to testing criteria. The test consisted of sampling 25 to 100 items from the store's shelves and racks. To pass the test, no more than 2 percent of the items sampled could ring up at higher than posted or advertised prices.

WSDA advises shoppers to watch the cash register closely and also urges businesses to tighten pricing practices.

"Shoppers need to take a minute to ensure they are getting the sale price or posted discount on their purchases," said Jerry Buendel, manager of WSDA's Weights and Measures Program. "Even though you may benefit from an undercharge one time, an overcharge could strain your holiday budget. However, the pain goes both ways. Pricing errors impact a business' bottom line especially when you consider the millions of items sold during this busy season."

The stores that fail scanning inspections typically have problems with their pricing programs or their employees need additional training. Weights and Measures officials are available to provide scanner training to stores on request.

"The survey showed that consumers are more likely to be undercharged than overcharged," Buendel noted. Of the items checked, 1 percent were overcharges to the consumer with an average overcharge of \$2.82. The overcharges ranged from as little as 10 cents to \$30.

However, inspectors found that 2 percent of the items were sold below the posted price. Consumers on average were undercharged \$13.86. The highest undercharge was at a department store jewelry counter where the price of a \$3,336 bracelet rang up at \$1,999, a difference of \$1,337.

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Shoppers in Seattle and Spokane may be less likely to run into problems than shoppers in the rest of Washington. All 38 of the stores inspected in Seattle passed inspection. Five percent of the 18 stores in Spokane failed. In the rest of the state, 17% of the 70 stores inspected failed the inspection.

Buendel offers the following shopping tips:

- Watch the cash register display at the check-out counter;
- Question the cashier about suspected errors;
- Write down prices and the posted discounts as you shop;
- Bring ads with you;
- Check your receipt and resolve any problems before you leave the store.

“If a scanning error isn’t fixed to your satisfaction, call your Weights and Measures official,” said Buendel. For scan price disputes in Seattle, call (206) 386-1296. In Spokane, call (509) 625-6611. For all other areas, call WSDA in Olympia at (360) 902-1857.

Officials conduct price verification inspections by following procedures developed by the National Conference on Weights and Measures. Businesses failing a price verification inspection are subject to civil penalties of up to \$5,000 under state law and can be charged with a misdemeanor under city ordinances.

Weights and Measures officials work to ensure equity in the market place. Inspectors test weighing and measuring devices such as gas pumps, grocery store scales, truck scales and taxi meters. They inspect packaged, canned and bottled products to ensure consumers are receiving the full measure stated on the package label. Officials are also charged with checking price scanners and verifying the quality of motor fuel.

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